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## Potential versus Reality: The Importance of Resources in Challenging Gendered Family Practices

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### Abstract

Family life is recognised as a central domain for the achievement of greater gender equality. Transformations in fatherhood policies have been key in signalling the value of both mothers and fathers as parents and reflecting new discourses about the ability and need for men and women to care. Meanwhile persistent inequalities in this sphere — in relation to the undertaking of practical care, and overall responsibility for household management — have been suggested as limits on progress. This article draws on studies in the UK that examine the relationship between gender, parenting, and poverty to suggest that overall empirical evidence continues to highlight the ongoing ways in which the allocation of financial resources within households, and the nature and extent of parental obligations to children, result in mothers continuing to do more in ways that seem unlikely to be further transformed without significant intervention and a shift in focus.

**Keywords:** Families; fathers; households; money; mothers; parenting; policy; poverty.

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## 1 Introduction: Understanding Gendering in Household and Families

The ongoing and deep-seated nature of gendered family practices remains something of a conundrum: what are the mechanisms that persist in ensuring differences in the expectations and observable practices of women and men in the home? This short paper brings together two sets of rather disparate studies to try and address the issue in relation to families with dependent children. The first set of studies centre on men's involvement and transformations in ideas of contemporary fathering. These studies largely emphasise how men's role within families has undergone substantial change, albeit with some caveats that this has been an uneven process across social groups and national contexts. This work, mainly situated in sociology and human geography, highlights changes in the relationship between parents and children, and relative expectations of mothers and fathers which suggest that the process of regendering is indeed under way. The second set of studies provide a challenge to this position in drawing attention to how women continue to take on more responsibility for the management of family life and, in particular, how in times of economic difficulty they cut back and sacrifice their own standard of living to maintain that of others. Empirical work on the uneven allocation of resources in households highlights that it is women, in particular mothers, who continue to have responsibility for household finances and in particular take responsibility for budgetary decisions when resources are limited. By considering these sets of studies together, the paper argues that money and the social policies that provide financial support to the least well off continue to be a hugely important element in efforts to develop more gender equal patterns of care and unpaid labour.

There is also a methodological element to the argument proposed here. Sociological work that examines how we should theorise contemporary family life rarely any longer adopts a restrictive nuclear idea based on a combination of marriage, co-residency, heterosexual couples, and the presence of biologically related adults and children (Murdock 1949). Instead, in the wake of debates that challenged this normative model as increasingly irrelevant, more expansive definitions that recognise the reality of increasing divorce and repartnership, the acceptability of gay relationships, and embraced elements of subjective family membership were proposed and largely accepted. The work of Morgan (1996; 2013) and latterly Finch (2007; 2011) suggested that the focus for academic researchers could productively be centred on examining the practices and displays that constitute and are recognised as defining family rather than on debating membership. However, while sociological *thinking* about family or rather families has shifted considerably, the starting point for much empirical work remains the household. As will be highlighted later in the discussion, failing to examine the extent to which family practices across and between households are contiguous with individuals' feelings and practices of care and obligation risks understating the extent to which gendered expectations about family life are being modified in creative ways and the degree to which gendered practices are maintained. Our current first choice tools of investigation tend to limit not only the evidence we can gather about gendered relationships within families but also how we conceive of the landscape in which gender transformations can take place.

## 2 Transformed Fatherhood and the Potential Regendering of Care

In recent years, fathers have become more visible figures on the parenting landscape (Dermott & Miller, 2015). There has been acknowledgement of fathers as important actors in their children's lives, discussion of the relationship between their rights and responsibilities, and attention paid to the way in which educational institutions, medical authorities and welfare services can both recognise and continue to support fathers to play a central role in children's upbringing (e.g. The Fatherhood Institute, 2016, on "Bringing fathers in"; Clapton, 2013 & Philip, Norman, & Brandon, 2018, on social work/ers; Yogman & Garfield, 2016, on pediatricians). This shift towards viewing fathers as particularly significant in children's lives exists alongside a move away from "a single model of unified masculinities" (Morgan, 2002, p. 280) such that both "caring masculinities" (Johansson & Klinth, 2008) and more traditional modes of hegemonic behaviours may co-exist. These more recent theorisations broaden the scope of what is permissible and so allow for greater diversity in the range of fathering practices deemed socially acceptable: "Fatherhood practices are never solid and static, but rather fluid as they are continuously being con-

structured and negotiated in relation to different structures in society” (Eydal & Rostgard 2014, p. 394); see also Locke & Yarwood, 2017, on how different discourses on gender, parenting and work co-exist.

At the everyday level, research shows that in many countries, men who are fathers now engage in a wider range of childcare practices, to a greater extent, than previously reported and in ways that are significantly different from fathers’ in previous generations (see for example Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004, on changing time spent with children in the US between 1960s and 1990s; and Henz, 2017, on the trend in UK during 2000s for increased time on childcare). Qualitative research has highlighted examples of fathers who are engaging to a much greater extent in the everyday tasks of social reproduction such as taking on male primary caregiving, thereby suggesting that this may no longer be truly exceptional (see earlier research by Doucet, 2006; Ransom, 2010, in Canada; and Hodgkinson & Brooks, 2018, in the UK) and that men working full-time may increasingly be finding it difficult to reconcile identities as workers and carers (Elliott, Parsons, Brannen, Elliott, & Phoenix, 2018).

Changes which have facilitated, or at least signalled, the ideal of caring, paternal involvement in family life are now commonplace across Europe, as well as some parts of Asia and North and South America. Blum, Kosłowski, Macht, & Moss (2018), who detail the type and extent of leave policies across 43 countries, note that only two countries they surveyed (South Africa<sup>1</sup> and the USA<sup>2</sup>) currently do not offer some form of either paternity or parental leave. Although the time available varies widely and it is not always well remunerated, in general the direction of travel on leave policies supporting parents continues to involve expansion or recalibration rather than cutting back (Blum et al., 2018, pp. 40–44). Within the UK — an example of a country that was not at the forefront of initiatives to support more engagement from fathering — it is possible to note numerous direct and indirect government supported initiatives that promote fathering involvement. From reading with their children (Fathers Reading Every Day – FRED<sup>3</sup>); training practitioners in health and social services to be more inclusive for fathers; and arguing for the reform of workplaces so that fathers can better balance their parental responsibilities and work (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2018). Therefore we see a range of changes across expectations of fathers’ role, practical involvement in day-to-day care and institutional encouragement that certainly support a greater role for men in children’s lives and potentially a route towards rethinking gendered ideas and practices of care.

### 3 Prompts for Transformation and Limitations on Change: Parenting Ideals, Money and Policy

What then has prompted these changes? Fathers’ preference for a different kind of relationship with their children that is more “dyadic” (Dermott, 2008) that is, it is developed and performed between father and child directly rather than necessarily relying on mothers as facilitators and promoters, have a number of origins. It could be attributed partly to a sense that with changing ideas and practices of childhood this relationship can have greater elements of reciprocity and be more fulfilling than in the past (echoing the more individualistic approach to personal relationships as envisaged by Giddens, 1992). Aligned with this is the suggestion that fathers have also adopted elements of “intensive parenthood” (Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012). Alongside fathers’ preferences there may be a push from mothers, whose changes in employment practices and increased expectations around gender equal parenting have led to men taking on more practical tasks and emotional labour, as well as instances where mothers perpetuate ongoing gender inequalities: therefore mothers may be as influential in challenging or maintaining the status quo around expectations of fatherhood as fathers themselves (see for example Miller, 2011, for an account of how parents “fall back into gender”).

Additionally, the role of policy is important. Nordic countries have led initiatives to introduce and later develop paternal and parental leave policies (see Eydal & Rostgard, 2014, for a more detailed discussion and Blum et al., 2018 for specific details on current arrangements): most recently Iceland’s 3/3/3

1. South Africa passed legislation in 2017 for parental leave.

2. Some states have though introduced limited unpaid parental leave (Yogman & Garfield, 2016).

3. <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/training-and-consultancy/fathers-reading-day-training/>

model which innovatively allocates three months each to mothers and fathers and a further three months that can be shared. These policies are important in presenting a state recognised model of good fatherhood; policies not only offer only financial resources to individuals but also a normative version of what is socially accepted/expected. This is perhaps most clear in the Swedish case which has exported the “Swedish model” of engaged and practically involved fatherhood through “daddy schools” in countries such as Russia, funded by SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) (SIDA 2015). So we have a situation in which there have been shifts in expressed views about what parenting should entail, in the economic strength of women and their associated ability to assert views over the sharing of unpaid work, and in the expanse of policies specifically targeted at ensuring fathers’ engage in child-related activities immediately post-birth.

Despite the changes outlined above, it is well recognised that family responsibilities for different aspects of paid and unpaid work remain firmly gendered. Opening up the sphere of *possibilities* has moved us to a position where men and women have greater involvement in both the realms of paid work and in childcare activities in the home and where a range of practices is more socially acceptable — but not to a world in which the labour and responsibility for childcare is equally shared in heterosexual couples. Across the range of household activities, mothers continue to do significantly more than fathers (e.g. Craig & Mullan, 2011).

England (2010) explains this, broadly, as a situation where women have entered the world of professional jobs that are valued but men have not reciprocated by engaging in the socially lower valued activities of care. Researching the reasons for this “uneven and stalled” gender revolution (England, 2010) raises the issue of whether the possibility for changing gender relations between heterosexual couples relies on mothers’ ability to leverage their (relatively) new economic power as fathers are forced to change their practice in response to demands from mothers who contribute increasingly more to family income (Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012). As a consequence this shift may exacerbate class based and financial inequalities in a number of ways. Most straightforwardly, women who are not in higher earning professions and therefore less able to match their spouse’ earning capacity will be more likely to shoulder more of the domestic work. Stay-at-home dads may be largely a relatively advantaged group whose female partners are in high-earning professional roles and who have the possibility of remaking careers in other areas or drawing on other forms of capital to support entrepreneurial activity. Dimmock (2014) in her doctoral thesis found that many of the men she interviewed who were primary carers having left previous full-time employment, were using the period out of the labour market to build up networks to develop a new business or retrain in another career alongside caring activities.

Although direct childcare may be an activity that mothers and increasingly fathers want to hold on to — in line with the rise of intimate and dyadic parenting — some aspects can and are outsourced for those with sufficient money. Those who take on this work are less well-paid and often migrant women thereby ensuring the degendering of the advantaged middle-class household at the expense of challenging broader social and economic gendered inequalities. This is often not captured well in quantitative analysis but had been discussed evocatively in Hochschild’s (2000) account of “global care chains” and by Eldén and Anving (2019) in their detailed work on how nannies, au pairs, children and parents, and nannies in Sweden think about their “practices of care.” This is perhaps especially notable given the previous expectation in Sweden, and Scandinavia more widely, that childcare was not, and should not be outsourced privately. Therefore we have a situation where any prospect of a gender revolution over care in families is not only stalled, i.e. has been achieved only partially, but that it is only particular groups across society that have seen substantial change.

## 4 Future Possibilities: More and Less Fruitful Directions

The discussion thus far leads to the conclusion that simply encouraging continuation of fathering ideals, women’s levels of employment, and parental/paternity leave policies will not alone prompt significant further regendering of family care. What then might lead to a different outcome? This section of the paper puts forward the argument that parenting ideals, the economy, and policies should all be part of the solution but in a different form to those outlined earlier.

As noted previously, changes to parenting ideals have had an impact on mothers as well as fathers with increasingly “intensive” expectations that demand time, energy, and active engagement in parenting activities that are viewed as being not only important for positive outcomes for children but essential and irreplaceable; parenthood becomes a project. Hence the transformation of men’s parenting appears more radical when viewed with a “fatherhood” lens than with a “gender” lens (Dermott & Miller, 2015). Underpinning the Swedish introduction of paid parental leave in 1974 — often acclaimed as being one of the most successful in the world — was an explicit commitment to achieve greater gender equality (Duvander, Ferrarini, & Thalberg, 2005) — i.e. it was not based only a concern with supporting men’s parenting but rather what Brighthouse and Olin Wright (2008) describe as “equality-promoting” leave policy. A decade ago, Dermott (2008) attempted to resolve the tension between discourse and practices of fatherhood by arguing that changed paternal thinking need not necessitate changes in behaviour across the board if they were not united in a commitment to gender equality. Reinforcing this, Nordenmark (2014), looking across Nordic and Southern Europe countries finds that gender-equality inclined fathers are more likely to be involved in unpaid and care work (whatever the policy regime).

The issue of how more gender equal orientations come about therefore comes to the fore: how do alternative ways of organising come about? Boyer et al. (2017) refer to work-life intermediaries as potentially an important but less recognised player in challenging gendered expectations around work and care.<sup>4</sup> These could be direct managers who are act as role models for parents and permit the “micro” flexibility (Dermott, 2011) that may be important in reconciling competing commitments, or networks of individuals outside of workplaces located through social media that provide peer-to-peer support, offer up different ways of doing work and care thus prompting more reflexive attitudes, and advice forums on how challenges can be navigated. Lomazzi, Israel, and Crespi (2019) in this vein argue that there is an “opportunity structure” involving a number of different elements including nation-wide policies, and institutional level support for work-family balance such as flexitime, that together impact on gender-role attitudes towards work and care.

There has understandably been a focus on the role that government policies can play, with especial attention on shared parental leave. It does seem clear that policies that are better remunerated and give fathers’ a specific leave allocation (daddy quota) result in a higher take up rate among men than is otherwise the case (O’Brien, 2005). However, it is also evident that policies that are focused specifically on early years parental involvement will not by themselves transform gender relations (and may inadvertently produce new distinctions between men with and without children). Even in the most widely celebrated examples, such as Sweden and Norway, there remains a gendered dimension to the use of parental leave with women taking a larger portion of the shared leave allocation. A wider set of policies that both reflect and encourage a range of employee-led flexible working practices, standardise a relatively low working hours culture, provide high quality and low-cost childcare, and provide a good level of income are also important. It may therefore be that it is states with social democratic principles which therefore adopt mechanisms supporting equality and social justice more widely where the regendering of family practices is more likely to occur. Indeed, it might be argued that in neo-liberal contexts that rely on market-led incentives this level of involvement in what is viewed as the private, domestic sphere would be unlikely.

Finally, and linked with policy initiatives, are the economic resources at play. Specifically, economic resources should be considered as more than just a measure of income and with reference to poverty<sup>5</sup> and consideration of how access to household resources are gendered. The poverty gap between mothers and fathers matters because, as discussed above, it is economic power that seems to have been one element in facilitating men’s greater involvement in familial work. The rates of men and women living in poverty in the UK have become more similar over the last decade or so (Dermott & Pantazis, 2014). This is partly due to the situation of older women which has improved markedly; as a consequence both of policies at national level which increased pensions, and changes in patterns of female employment which have resulted in women having more independent income throughout their lifecourse including in re-

4. This draws on the idea of labour market intermediaries (LMIs) who are increasingly important in flexible and less regulated employment sectors. In gathering information about posts, matching jobs, and administering wages and other aspects of the employment relationship, LMIs sit between employees and employers.

5. Poverty here is not only a lack of income but also living without the basic necessities of life in a given society.



tirement (Dermott & Pantazis, 2014). The situation of lone mothers in contrast has remained largely static with poverty rates among the highest of any demographic group — 65% of lone parents were living in poverty in 2012 compared to 30% of couple parents. The high rate of poverty in lone parent households (the vast majority, over 90%, of whom are women) is because policies intently focused on reducing unemployment rates among this group on the supposition that paid work would necessarily reduce poverty. What this did not take into account was that subsidised childcare is limited and work that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate childcare while also being well paid is restricted to a narrow selection of jobs. Thus economic inequalities are exacerbated when looked at together with living arrangements and associated caring responsibilities after separation or divorce. Access to necessities and economic resources matter both because they level the playing field for negotiations between mothers and fathers in relation to care and because they extend the range of options available. For those living in poverty who are cutting back on food just to ensure that their children do not go without (Dermott & Pomati, 2018), more of whom are mothers, there is no scope to think about or particular value to accommodating gender-equal practices.

Given that access to a certain level of resource is important, it is also important to recognise the gendered inequalities that exist *within* households. As has been noted by authors such as Bennett (2013) there is an assumption that within the household, resources are shared equally: the limited data that is available suggests that this is not actually the case (Bennett & Daly, 2014; Burchardt & Karigiannaki, 2018). While the picture is complex and changing, marginalized women seem to have more limited access to household income, and also possibly greater responsibility for managing restricted budgets and economizing to protect others within the household. Independent income does seem to allow women more control over care, paying for services or being able to negotiate for greater control over household resources (Bennett & Daly, 2014). Again, this means that the potential for the wholesale regendering of family practices may be reliant on recognising and then challenging household inequalities of which we are currently largely unaware.

## 5 Conclusion

As Nancy Fraser (1994) argued in proposing the “universal caregiver” model in which both women and men would combine employment with responsibilities for primary caregiving, gender equity is only likely to be achieved if men become more like women. The centrality of family practices to contemporary gendered relationships means that for those interested in understanding and transforming gender relationships, the nature and extent of how families are doing gender (and potentially undoing gender) needs to be taken seriously. This short discussion paper has drawn together existing research which has posited that the nature of men’s caregiving and employment practices has led to some significant transformations but is limited by the interplay of economic resources and the lack of a sufficiently strong impetus from policy and significant institutions. The different nature of father-child relationships may be beneficial for men and their children and policy initiatives explicitly directed toward improving gender equality have had some impact when they are centrally funded and normalised. However, these alone are unlikely to be sufficient in leading to a wholesale regendering of family life that includes the less advantaged as well as the better off. We can expect that, in ageing societies, inequalities over care will be exacerbated and become acute in many regions in the near future. Research on the nature and existence of family ties of responsibility and care that are located across households are likely to highlight limitations to the current undoing of gender and present additional challenges. This paper has suggested that in order for the project of regendering care and intimacy to become comprehensive there will need to be a recognition of the role of resources and policy initiatives and that family practices do not begin and end with the household.

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